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1961/04/05

April 5, 1961

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

SUBJECT: Cuba

1. When you asked me after the meeting yesterday what I thought about the Cuban proposal, I am afraid that I did not give a properly ordered answer.

2. My brief answer is that I am in favor of a continuation and expansion of the present approach to Cuba -- i.e., quiet infiltration of anti-Castro exiles into Cuba and subsequent support through air drops. The beachhead operation, with the landing and recognition of the provisional government would represent, however, a change of phase in our Cuban policy. If entirely successful, it would have the highly beneficial result of getting rid of the Castro regime. If we could achieve this by a swift, surgical stroke, I would be for it. But in present circumstances the operation seems to me to involve many hazards; and on balance -- and despite the intelligence and responsibility with which the case for the action has been presented -- I am against it.

3. The following considerations concerning the beachhead operation seem to me vital:

a) No matter how "Cuban" the equipment and personnel, the US will be held accountable for the operation, and our prestige will be committed to its success.

b) Since the Castro regime is presumably too strong to be toppled by a single landing, the operation will turn into a protracted civil conflict.

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4. If these assumptions are true, it seems to me that the operation involves the following hazards:

a) The protraction of the struggle and the commitment of American prestige (especially if we proceed to recognize and supply a provisional government) will create increasing pressure on us to guarantee the success of the operation through ever more intense and overt involvement. It will seem increasingly intolerable to subject ourselves to the humiliation of a defeat in Cuba. If the landing fails to trigger uprisings behind the lines and defections in the Militia (and the evidence that it would do so is inconclusive), the logic of the situation could well lead us, step by step, to the point where the last step would be to dispatch the Marines.

b) The protraction of the struggle will give the Soviet Union a magnificent opportunity to wage political warfare. Cuba will become our Hungary; and, since our pretensions to international good behavior have been greater than those of the Russians, we would be more damaged by Hungary than they were (and they were considerably damaged). The situation is made to order for the Communist agitprop apparatus. Jose Marti Brigades and no doubt Abraham Lincoln Brigades will be recruited to support Castro, not just from beyond the Iron Curtain, but in Western Europe, Africa, Asia and Latin America. There will be demonstrations and riots around the world on the model of the movement for Loyalist Spain in the late Thirties. There will be resolutions in the United Nations, with testimony by prisoners or Castro agents about the US preparation of and responsibility for the action.

(I must say, however, that I question the view that this operation would have serious substantive effect on Soviet policy, in Laos or elsewhere. My guess is that the Soviet Union regards Cuba as in our domain and is rather surprised that we have not taken action before this to rid ourselves of Castro.

(I also think that the operation would be more easily accepted in Latin America, where there is spreading knowledge about the nature of the Castro regime, than in Western Europe, Africa or Asia, where it will seem gross, unprovoked and bullying imperialism.)

c) As the struggle pretracts itself and as the political campaign mounts against the US, our government -- and you -- will have to meet penetrating questions about our role in the affair. We will have either to evade the questions and thereby tacitly plead guilty; or deny involvement; or declare ignorance. Each course presents obvious difficulties. If we admit involvement, we admit action taken in violation of the basic charters of the hemisphere and of the United Nations. If we justify such violation by pleading a higher law, we place ourselves thereafter on the same moral plane as the Soviet Union. If we deny involvement, few will believe us; and we invite a repetition of the U-2 episode, which made us look absurd before the world.

Whatever we do, the effect will be to spoil the new US ^{image} -- the image of intelligence, reasonableness and honest firmness which has already had such an extraordinary effect in changing world opinion about the US and increasing world confidence in US methods and purposes.

d) And there is the Fulbright point; our responsibility for the post-Castro regime. The eyes of the world will be upon us, and we cannot afford a post-Castro mess. On the basis of the documents they have submitted to us containing their ideas for the future, I rather share his doubts as to the competence of the exile leaders.

5. These hazards would be outweighed, in my judgment, by the advantage of getting rid of Castro

- a) if the operation could be swift and surgical
- b) if support were forthcoming from our allies, both in Latin America and in Europe
- c) if the danger to the US were visible and overwhelming.

Conditions (a) and (b) seem doubtful. Of (c), it can only be said that it is not self-evident to many people (including the Chairman of the

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Senate Foreign Relations Committee).

The counter argument would be: why not wait? Every month Castro is making himself more unpopular both through the hemisphere and in his own country. Every month more people through the world are coming to understand the nature of his regime. Opinion has changed tremendously in the last six months; it will change even more in the next six months, if Castro is not made a martyr. The combination of internal discontent and external isolation will doom his regime.

The counter argument to this, of course, is that time will permit a military build-up and a perfection of internal control which will make Castro invulnerable to anything but a major invasion. In the meantime, he will prosecute his campaign against the hemisphere. The counter argument to that is that the measures which increase his invulnerability will also increase his unpopularity; that the more he tries to totalitarianise and terrorise Cuba, the more he makes Communism an object of hatred through the hemisphere; and, if he uses his military strength against any other state, he gives us the excuse we need for collective intervention.

I am not sure that this debate permits a categorical judgment on the question whether time would run for or against us in Cuba.

6. The consequences of abandonment remain to be considered. Abandonment would conceivably suggest a US failure of nerve. It might seem to place a premium on the defiance of Castro; it would certainly dishearten those in Latin America who have exposed themselves by demanding action against Castro; it would certainly disillusion the brave men we have gathered in Guatemala; it would confront us with the problem of demobilising and resettling these men. The fact that the expedition was conceived, prepared and then called off at the last moment would increase Castro's prestige and power.

These are all powerful points. They weigh very heavily in my mind on the side of going ahead. However, I hesitate to say that we should do something simply because we have seemed to commit ourselves to doing it which, if we were starting fresh, we would not do.

On balance, I think that the risks of the operation slightly outweigh the risks of abandonment. These latter risks would be mitigated somewhat

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if we could manage a partial rather than a total abandonment (i. e., if we could put the men into Cuba quietly).

We might also be able to make some diplomatic capital out of the abandonment. We might have Thompson say to Khrushchev, for example, that we have discouraged an invasion of Cuba; that this shows our genuine desire to compose differences; but that K. should tell his friend to behave, because our patience is not inexhaustible and we cannot hope to restrain the Cuban patriots indefinitely. Conceivably we might be able to turn abandonment to some diplomatic advantage within the hemisphere too.

Arthur Schlesinger, jr.